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ENVIRONMENTAL SECRETARY HERZFELDER TARGETS URBAN ASTHMA
New anti-idling measures aim to reduce harmful effects of emissions

Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Herzfelder was joined today by members of the Legislature and the public health field to announce an educational pilot program to combat the alarming prevalence of asthma among urban school children.

An initiative of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs' Office of Environmental Justice, the "It's Our E-Mission. Take Action. Don't Idle." program will alert bus drivers, parents, school officials, and students of the potentially harmful effects of exhaust fumes.

"Too many young people in our urban areas suffer the dangerous and debilitating effects of asthma," said Secretary Herzfelder, speaking to approximately 300 students, teachers and administrators at the Blackstone Elementary School in Boston's South End. "The situation is urgent and we must spread the word to students, parents, educators, and bus operators that excessive idling hurts kids." This pilot program will be implemented starting this week at the Blackstone Elementary School and at the Agassiz Elementary School in Jamaica Plain.

Asthma is the single largest cause of school absence in the United States. A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that Massachusetts has the highest rates of asthma in the nation with 9.5% of Bay State adults reporting the ill effects of the condition. The national average was 7.2%. Children are more susceptible to asthma because their lungs are not fully developed and they breathe at a 50% faster rate than adults.

"This initiative is so important," said State Senator Dianne Wilkerson. "Our children deserve to be surrounded by a cleaner environment. Asthma is one health problem we can do something about if we do more to reduce exhaust fumes. School is the best place to start."

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The “It’s Our E-Mission. Take Action. Don’t Idle.” program will educate students by giving them hand cards to read and bring home to discuss with their parents. The cards explain the dangers of emissions from idling vehicles and urge parents to have their cars tuned regularly to further reduce emissions. Cards will be printed in English as well as in Spanish.

“It’s Our E-Mission. Take Action. Don’t Idle.” will also ask teachers and school officials to establish and abide by a dismissal system that will prevent students from inhaling fumes while waiting to board school buses. Bus drivers will be asked to only run their engines only when absolutely necessary and will be offered bumper stickers that state: “I Care About Clean Air. I run my engine only when it is necessary.”

“Statistics show that the prevalence of asthma among children of color is significantly higher than in other children,” said Carlos Alvarez, Executive Director of the American Lung Association of Massachusetts. “We applaud Environmental Affairs’ initiative and urge them to extend this program to all Boston schools, especially those in high asthma areas such as Dorchester, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain.”

Environmental Affairs has requested an additional \$50,000 to expand the “It’s Our E-Mission. Take Action. Don’t Idle.” in the 2004 fiscal year. To learn more about Massachusetts’ efforts in Environmental Justice, visit www.mass.gov/envir and click on the words “Environmental Justice” on the left-hand side of the page.

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